



Sonia Medina,
Executive Director,
Climate Change

Integrating a climate lens is vital for foundations working with children

The Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) is a London-based philanthropy with offices worldwide. Established in 2002 by Sir Christopher Hohn and Jamie Cooper, its mission is to improve the lives of children in developing countries who live in poverty.

The climate crisis is the single biggest threat to children, today and in the future. This is not simply about future generations. The climate crisis is already with us. Children in developing countries are particularly exposed, both to direct risks related to agricultural production and diseases and to indirect risks such as war or conflict. A family under economic or social pressure is more likely to flee (increasing immigration), take their kids out of school (reducing educational attainment) or marry them off (increasing the incidence of child marriage). More and more evidence suggests that this type of pressure can be a result of phenomena related to climate change.

CIFF has reached the conclusion that it must combine its work on children’s issues with minimising the risk of climate impacts. Integrating a climate lens into CIFF’s portfolio has therefore become critical to fulfil our mission.

Ten years ago CIFF started funding climate change issues with a grant in the UK, even though its children’s portfolio was, and continues to be, focused on South Asia and Africa. This first grant supported a campaign against plans for a new coal power plant in the UK. But coal is a global problem and we need alternatives. CIFF’s portfolio has grown organically over the last decade to include not only power sector reform (replace coal with renewables) but also air quality, clean and livable cities and low-carbon agriculture.

One challenge with working on climate change is measurement. Making impact tangible is crucial. CIFF invests a lot in monitoring and tracking performance of its grants so that impact can be maximised by course-correcting quickly and as necessary.

CIFF is committed to addressing its own impact on carbon emissions. We started measuring our carbon footprint annually a few years ago. We compensate for our emissions by buying EU allowances and Gold Standard offsets. From 2020, we will also adopt our own emission reduction targets.

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Few foundations work on climate yet. The street protests by Fridays For Future and others, and the wildfires in Australia and California, have raised climate in the public consciousness.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underlined society's unpreparedness for a crisis and the need to build resilience in communities. There are many opportunities, throughout Europe and in the rest of the world.

Foundations that do not want to build up their own capacity to work on climate can partner with others, pooling or aligning funds. In general, collaboration is to be encouraged.

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Recommendations for funders

- The European Green Deal has the potential to be a cornerstone in the European response to climate change and significantly influence policymaking throughout the decade. Decisive support from foundations and funders to shape and push the Deal will create a strong and lasting impact.
- Many foundations are already operating in Africa but interventions on climate change are rare, especially when it comes to mitigation. Working with existing structures and networks to add a climate 'lens' to any charitable work can help create more resilient communities for the continent.
- The electrification of transport is reaching a tipping point. This is an area where targeted investments can have a significant impact and philanthropy can play a unique catalytic role.